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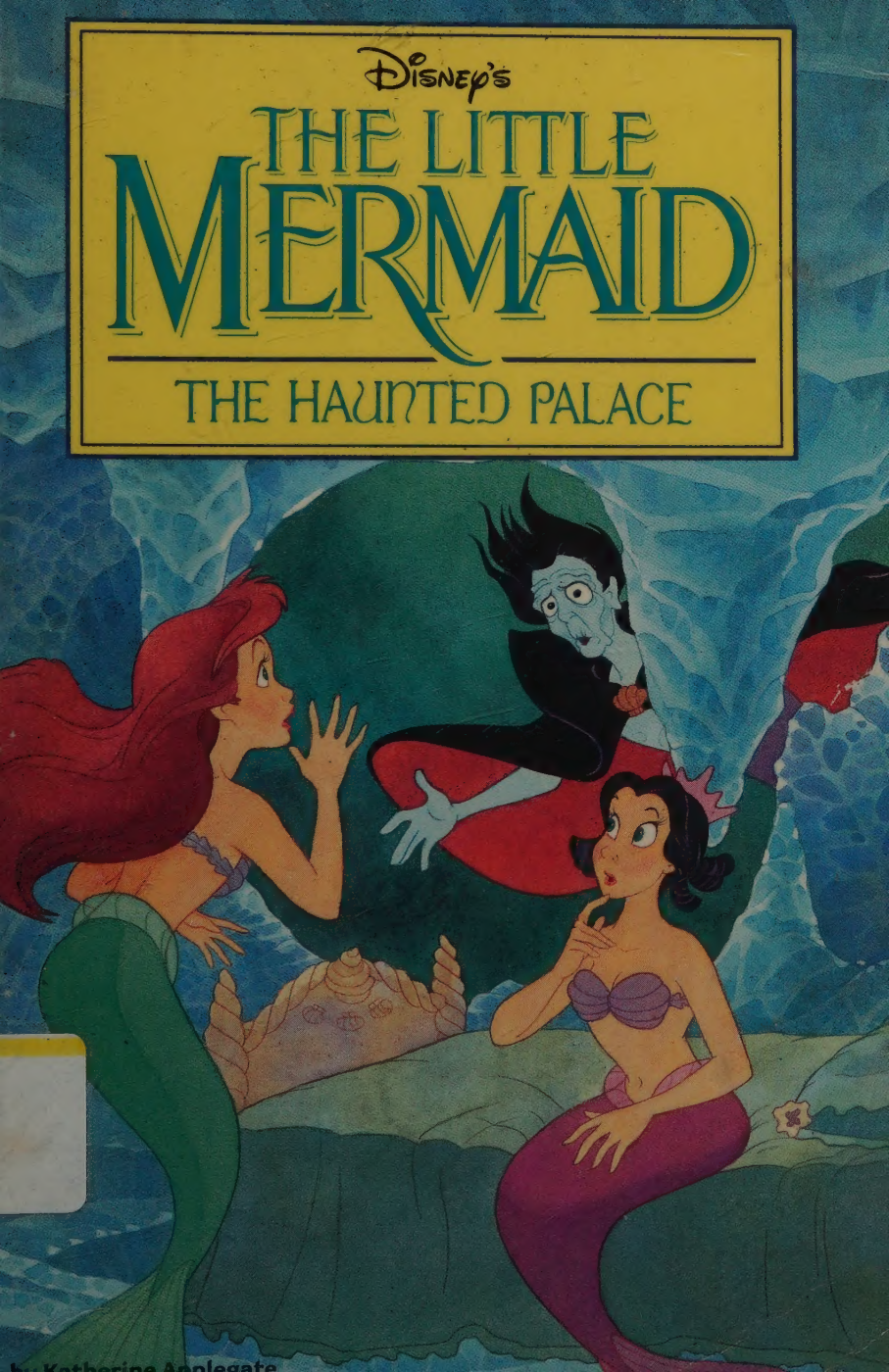
THE HAUNTED PALACE



by Katherine Applegate

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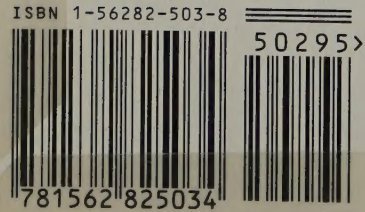
ISBN 1-56282-503-8



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07/10/03 Gift Fa3

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 93-70936

ISBN: 1-56282-503-8

FIRST EDITION

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

For Alex and Maxx,
with love

"What an amazing palace!" whispered the little mermaid princess, Ariel, as she stared out the window of her father's sea-horse-drawn coach. Before her loomed a huge building carved out of a mountain of shimmering blue ice.

"Amazing?" repeated Alana, one of Ariel's six sisters. She shivered. "That's not the word I'd use. Try creepy. Or spooky. Or—"

"Now, now, Alana," King Triton interrupted with a smile. "I've been visiting Duchess Dagmer's castle since I was a boy.

Trust me. It's really quite beautiful inside."

Duchess Dagmer was about to celebrate her one-hundredth birthday, and merpeople from all the oceans were coming to her ice castle in the Arctic Ocean for the big celebration in her honor. King Triton had been looking forward to the trip for weeks. Ariel and her sisters were even going to surprise the duchess by singing her a special birthday song composed by Sebastian, Triton's royal court composer.

The coach passed through an elaborately sculpted gate made of ice. Ariel stared up at a window in the tallest tower of the palace. Behind a sheer curtain, dark shadows danced.

"Alana's right," said Aquata, Ariel's oldest sister. "Something about this place gives me the shivers, too."

Arista laughed. "Maybe that's because the water is so much colder here." She rubbed her arms, which were covered in goose bumps. "Don't worry. We'll get used to it soon enough."

"There are icebergs everywhere," Andrina commented. "Look at that one." She pointed to the huge mountain of glimmering, jagged crystal they were passing. It reached with

icy fingers all the way to the surface of the water far above them.

"Duchess Dagmer's castle is carved out of one of the smaller icebergs," said Triton. "Even so, it took many, many years to build."

"Still, if I didn't know better, I'd say it looks haunted," Alana said.

Sebastian rubbed his claws together nervously. "Now that you mention it," he said, "rumor has it that this place is—" The King gave him a warning look, and Sebastian cleared his throat. "Not that I listen to rumors, mind you. Terrible thing, gossip. Terrible."

"Tell us, Sebastian," Ariel urged. "What did you hear about the castle?"

"Never you mind," Sebastian said quickly. "It's all just silliness. Idle chatter, nothing more."

"Sebastian," Ariel pressed, "tell us or we'll sing off-key at the birthday party!"

"Don't you dare!" Sebastian cried, waving an arm. "After all the weeks you've practiced—"

"It's all right, Sebastian," the King interrupted. "You can tell them. They'll hear the stories about Morven soon enough. And

it's not as if they're really true." He smiled mischievously. "At least, I hope they're not."

"Morven?" Ariel echoed. "Who's Morven?"

"The question is, *What's* Morven?" Sebastian lowered his voice to a whisper. "Rumor has it he's a ghost who's haunted the castle for hundreds of years."

"Please, Sebastian!" Attina said, laughing. "A ghost?"

"People have seen him floating through the halls in the middle of the night," Sebastian said darkly.

"You've been to Duchess Dagmer's castle lots of times, Father," Arista said. "Have you ever seen him?"

The King stroked his long white beard thoughtfully. "No. But I've met one or two people who claim they have, including the duchess herself."

Alana glanced at the castle nervously. "Do you think they were telling the truth?"

"I think *they* thought they were telling the truth," said the King. He shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe there really is a Morven. I rather like thinking the castle is haunted. It's fun to imagine that the old fellow could be lurking around any corner, although the

duchess tells me he hasn't made an appearance in quite a while. She still loves to tell stories of the times she's seen him, though." Triton chuckled. "She talks about him as if he's a dear old friend of hers. She's quite a character."

Tall ice pillars lined the last few hundred yards of the way. Several magnificent coaches were already parked outside the castle, but the spot closest to the door had been reserved for King Triton's coach.

The coach came to a stop before the castle, and the mermaids fell silent. Two stout, serious-looking groupers dressed in blue-and-gold capes swung open the huge castle doors. Out swept a beautiful old merwoman. Her white hair was piled high on her head, and she wore a gown of shimmering silver. She waved at the King, then took the fin of one of the groupers and began to swim toward the coach.

"There she is," Triton said with a fond smile. "The Duchess Dagmer."

With the King in the lead, the princesses swam out of the coach. Ariel and Alana were the last ones in line. As they all swam forward to meet the duchess, Ariel noticed a slight

movement out of the corner of her eye. There, peering out from behind the nearest pillar, was a big round white head with shining black eyes!

Could it be . . . ? Ariel blinked. The head blinked back.

Ariel nudged Alana. "What's wrong?" Alana asked. Just then her eyes fell on the creature, and she let out a piercing scream. "It's the ghost!" she cried.

"It's him!" Alana screamed. "Morven!"

Adella spun around, her eyes wide. "Did you say Morven?" she cried. "Swim for your lives!"

"Calm down," said Attina over her shoulder as she hurried through the castle door. "I'm sure there's a logical explanation for whatever you saw."

"Oh dear," muttered Sebastian as Alana streamed past him in a blur of bubbles. "I *knew* those rumors were true. I just *knew* it."

Adella was swimming so furiously that she

plowed straight into the duchess. "My dear!" Duchess Dagmer cried. "You look as if you've seen a ghost!"

Triton shook his head. "I'm afraid they think they have."

Ariel lagged behind, pausing just outside the door. Whatever she'd seen, it certainly had *looked* like a ghost. Still, something made her wonder if she should take another peek. She swam back toward the ice pillar.

"But we did see a ghost," she heard Alana arguing. "It had a monstrous white head and gigantic black eyes!"

"Don't be silly, Alana," Andrina said firmly.

Ariel swam around the pillar. To her surprise, a frightened little creature covered with white fur was hiding there, shaking with fear.

"Here's your ghost, Alana," Ariel called. "Come and see."

The duchess swam forward and peered over Ariel's shoulder. "Why, that's Sealia," she exclaimed. "She can be a little shy with strangers."

Alana came forward, too. She smiled at Sealia. "Oh, she's adorable! But what *is* she, exactly?"

"You've never seen an arctic seal before, dear?" asked the duchess.

"Well . . ." Alana hesitated. "Just in our sea-ography books. We've never been this far north before."

"I'm sorry, Sealia," Ariel apologized. "Father and Sebastian were telling us stories about Morven, and I guess we got a little carried away."

Sealia smiled and did a graceful back flip. "That's OK, Princess," the little seal said shyly.

"Now, now," said the duchess as she led her guests toward the door. "Let's not get ourselves into a tizzy about old Morven. He's a harmless old ghost—wouldn't harm a minnow."

"You mean you really believe this place is haunted?" Alana asked.

"Of course it's haunted." The duchess threw back her head and laughed. "Wouldn't have it any other way. It's a great icebreaker. My guests are always watching for the old fellow. He hasn't made an appearance in quite a few years, but maybe you girls will be the lucky ones who get to meet him."

Ariel exchanged glances with her sisters.

"That's not my idea of lucky," Alana whispered as the duchess moved forward to talk to Triton and Sebastian.

Ariel nodded. Even if Morven were completely harmless, she wasn't sure she liked the idea of meeting a ghost face-to-face. That is, if ghosts even exist, she told herself.

They all entered a hall lined with green ice as smooth and polished as a mirror. The high vaulted ceiling was studded with black pearls, and golden lanternfish glowed every few feet to chase away the gloom. At the far end of the hall the sisters could see through a wide arched entryway into a large, elegant sitting room, where dozens of people were chatting.

"Everyone's here, Triton," said the duchess, gesturing toward the sitting room. "Everyone who's anyone. I'll have the butler show you to your suite so you can freshen up from your journey. Then I'll announce you to my other guests."

She nodded to a large sturgeon who had been floating discreetly nearby. He came forward, bowed to the King, then gave a sharp whistle. A second later an octopus

appeared and lifted King Triton's and Sebastian's bags.

"Triton, your rooms and Sebastian's are in the north tower," the duchess explained. "I think the girls are going to be somewhere else . . ." Her voice trailed off, and she glanced around. "Now where are those boys?" She turned to Aquata. "My great-grandsons insisted on choosing your rooms themselves, and I'm afraid they didn't tell me what they'd decided."

At that moment two very cute merboys about Ariel's age swam into view around the corner at the far end of the hall. "Here we are, Great-grandmother," one of them called out.

"Ah, good," the duchess said, beaming, as the boys swam up and bowed to the King. "Girls, do you remember the dukes?" She winked. "I know they remember you."

"We baby-sat for them once when they came to our castle with their parents on a state visit," said Aquata. She smiled at the boys. "Which one of you is which?"

"I'm Starwin," said the older boy, brushing a lock of blond hair from his eyes.

"And I'm Winterford," said the other boy,

who was a little younger and had a mischievous smile.

"You two were such troublemakers!" Aquata exclaimed. She nudged Adella. "Remember how we threatened them with Octavio to make them behave?"

Adella laughed. "I remember! We told them he was a savage octopus from the Dead Sea that we kept in the closet for really bad boys. Octavio loved it—he even played along with the joke."

"It worked, too," Andrina recalled. "You boys were as sweet as otters after that."

"We believed you," said Winterford. "How were we supposed to know that octopus was actually as harmless as a clam? Truth is, you scared us to death! We were terrified the whole time we were there."

Starwin nodded. "The worst part of all was when you made us think that the wild octopus had gotten loose and attacked Ariel. I don't know how you did it, but you made it look as though it had practically bitten her fins off."

"Sea-beet sauce," Ariel said with a giggle. "From far away it looks just like blood. I must admit, that was one of my best ideas."

"Oh, so that part was all *your* idea?" Winterford asked Ariel.

"It sure was her idea," Andrina said proudly. "Ariel was pretty young then, but we had already taught her how to play a good practical joke."

The sisters shared a laugh remembering that day.

"Well, we didn't think it was funny," Starwin said. "We thought she really was at death's door."

"Although we were a little suspicious when she made that miraculous recovery just in time for dinner," Winterford added.

Aquata smiled. "Well, I'm sure you forgive us for all that, don't you?"

"Of course we do," said Starwin, blushing.

The duchess laughed heartily. "Believe me, girls, these two have played more than their share of their own practical jokes since then. You must have really inspired them." She turned to the dukes. "Boys, why don't you show the princesses to their rooms now?" Another octopus porter swam over and picked up the girls' bags.

"After you, Princesses," said Starwin, bowing.

Alana hesitated. "No," she said, "after you."

"Scaredy-catfish," teased Attina, swimming past. She grinned at Starwin. "Alana's worried about all those Morven stories," she explained as Winterford led the way along the hall.

"I don't blame her," Starwin muttered with a frown.

"You mean you *believe* all this ghost stuff?" Ariel asked.

"No, of course not," Winterford said quickly, glancing back at her. "Sure, we've seen some things . . ." His voice drifted off. "But nothing we could be *certain* was a ghost."

"I thought the duchess said that nobody's seen Morven in years," Arista said.

"We haven't told her what we've seen," Starwin said darkly. "We don't want to scare her."

Andrina laughed. "*Scare* her? From the way she talks about him, it seems as though the duchess would be more likely to have a party for Morven if he appeared than be scared of him."

Winterford shrugged. "Maybe so. She's convinced that Morven is harmless. But we're not so sure."

"What do you mean?" Aquata asked. "He certainly sounds harmless to me."

"As harmless as a ghost can be, anyway," Alana added with a shudder.

"We think Morven is getting tired of sharing his palace, that's all," Winterford said mysteriously. He shrugged again. "We could be wrong, but . . ." He let his voice trail off.

The mermaids exchanged nervous glances. "Do you visit your great-grandmother often?" Arista asked the boys as they reached the second floor.

"We come here for every vacation," Starwin replied. "We know this castle like the back of our hands. Great-grandmother even let us pick out your rooms. And we found just the right ones." He stopped at the entrance to a long hallway. "This is the perfect wing for you," he said. "Seven rooms, all in a row." He paused and glanced at his brother. "I suppose we should give this first room to Ariel. It's the smallest room, and Ariel's the smallest princess."

"Good idea," Winterford said. "Besides, Ariel has always seemed so brave, and this room—"

"Quiet," Starwin snapped.

"Wait a minute," Ariel said nervously. "What does this room have to do with being brave?"

"Nothing," Starwin said innocently.

"Nothing at all," Winterford agreed.

Starwin waved his hand. "Old stories, that's all."

"Besides, there have been Morven sightings all over the palace," Winterford said. "So it probably doesn't matter that this was the room—"

"I *said* be quiet," Starwin interrupted.

"What about the room?" Ariel asked again.

"See what you've done?" Starwin said to Winterford. "Now Ariel's going to be upset, just because this was the room where it happened."

"Where *what* happened?" Ariel demanded.

"The room where Morven died, of course," said Winterford.

"Died?" Ariel echoed. "Died *how*?"

Winterford opened his mouth to reply, but Starwin spoke first. "I think we've said too much already," he said quickly. "Besides, those are just stupid rumors. There's no reason to be scared, Ariel."

"You're *not* scared, are you?" Winterford asked, looking worried.

"Of course not," Ariel said. She smiled. "Not much, anyway."

Alana bit her lower lip. "Well, *I* am."

"Me, too," said Adella, and Arista nodded.

Slowly Starwin opened the door to Ariel's room. Ariel peeked inside. The gloomy room looked as if it hadn't been used in many years.

"When was the last time someone stayed in here?" Aquata demanded.

Starwin and Winterford looked at each other uneasily. "I guess we should tell you," Starwin said at last. "No one's really used this room since Morven."

"I hope he doesn't mind that you're borrowing it now," Winterford joked in a strained voice.

"Isn't there somewhere else we could stay?" Adella asked.

"Please?" Alana added.

"This is the only wing with seven bedrooms," Starwin said apologetically. "We thought you would want to be together."

"It doesn't seem fair that Ariel should get stuck in here," Attina said. "Maybe we should take turns."

"I'll be fine," Ariel assured her sisters, although secretly she was longing for her own comfortable bedchamber back home. "Maybe I'd feel better if you could tell me more about Morven," she said to the dukes.

"Oh, there's really not much to tell," Winterford said quickly, looking away.

"You know how stories get started," Starwin added. He headed down the hall briskly. "Come on," he said. "I'll show the rest of you to your rooms."

"I'll go tell Great-grandmother that the princesses are getting settled," Winterford volunteered.

"Have fun, Ariel," Andrina said with a wink. "And keep an eye out for Morven!"

Ariel watched as the octopus porter stretched out the tentacle holding her bag and set it down in the room. His other seven arms were still loaded with luggage. Adella, naturally, had insisted on bringing *two* bags.

Ariel sat down gently on the big bed. It let out a loud creak, and she jumped back up with a start. She gazed around her and shivered. Even with two lanternfish glowing, the dark blue shimmering walls of ice made the room seem unnaturally dark. In one gloomy corner a sea snail slithered across the floor in front of an empty bookcase.

Oh well, she told herself, we're only going to be here for a few days. She decided to start dressing for dinner. She just hoped the

dining hall was nicer than this gloomy room.

Ariel opened her suitcase. As she was fastening her coral pendant around her neck, she thought she heard something—a rustling noise, as soft as a whisper. It seemed to be coming from every part of the room at once.

She peeked out into the hall, but it was empty. I'm just hearing the current rushing by outside, she told herself. But suddenly she couldn't wait to join the others downstairs.

DISCARD

"Are you all settled in your rooms, my dears?" the duchess asked at dinner.

"Everything's lovely, Duchess," Ariel answered.

"If you like living in a giant haunted ice cube," Adella added under her breath so that only Ariel could hear.

The princesses were seated together at one end of a long banquet table overflowing with wonderful food. Lanternfish and eels glowed everywhere, and the polished ice reflected the light back warmly. Dozens of

other guests were also seated at the huge table, laughing and talking and filling the room with cheerful noise. Ariel felt much better. This was nothing like the gloomy upstairs wing where she and her sisters were staying.

"Perhaps tomorrow the dukes can take you on a tour of the castle," the duchess said. "They know all the nooks and crannies."

"It's a beautiful castle," Alana said as a waiter placed a plate of sea-beet salad in front of her. "So . . . um, roomy."

"It's so nice to have it filled up with all my friends," said the duchess. "There's far more room than Morven and I need."

"So you actually *do* believe in Morven?" Arista asked. "You weren't just teasing us before?"

"Of course I believe in Morven," said the duchess with just the hint of a smile.

"Would you tell us about him?" Attina asked. "The dukes wouldn't say very much."

"Well, they don't know him as well as I do," said the duchess. "After all, very few people have seen him. I myself first saw Morven when I was a little girl. I was playing hide-and-seek upstairs, and there he was,

plain as the nose on my face: pale blue skin and scales, long streaming black hair—and eyes the color of sporn ice."

"What's sporn ice?" Arista asked.

"Here in the Arctic Ocean, we have seventy-two different words for the many types of ice," the duchess said. "Sporn ice is as black as a devilfish."

Adella reached for her third helping of sea biscuits. "So you're saying Morven has black eyes and the rest of him is *blue*?" she asked.

"Of course he's blue," Arista replied logically. "He's dead."

The duchess laughed. "Poor Morven. The legend goes that he was one of the very earliest dukes of the Arctic Ocean, many years before even *my* great-grandmother was born. In fact, if I recall correctly, Morven was my great-grandmother's great-grandmother's great-grandfather."

"Whew! That *is* a long time ago," exclaimed Andrina.

"Yes, indeed," the duchess said with a smile. "According to the story, Morven was the one who built this magnificent castle. He helped to hollow out many of the rooms

himself—this banquet hall, for instance. He really loved this place."

"Loved it a bit *too* much, I'd say," Sebastian put in.

Sebastian was seated next to the princesses, and Ariel noticed that he kept looking over his shoulder nervously as he ate. She tried to hide a smile as she realized that the sisters weren't the only ones who were worried that they might encounter Morven.

"What do you mean, Sebastian?" asked Arista curiously.

Sebastian rolled his eyes. "From what I hear, Morven took his position as a proud homeowner to extremes," he said dryly. "He was very protective of this palace. I even heard that he wouldn't let anyone outside his immediate family stay within the castle walls." He waved a claw dramatically. "Can you imagine? All this room, and the servants and everyone else who worked in the palace had to commute back and forth from town."

"Actually, Sebastian," the duchess corrected him with a smile, "I don't think that part of the legend is entirely true. But old Morven certainly was eccentric. There were rooms in the palace—specifically, the ones he'd

hollowed out entirely with his own hands—that he wouldn't let anyone else into, even to clean them. He once flew into a rage when he discovered a maid polishing the furniture in one of the rooms. The poor girl was new, and nobody had warned her about Morven's rules, so it wasn't her fault. But he fired her on the spot anyway." She shook her head. "I don't know if he even let his own wife into his private rooms, although he didn't care who went where in the rest of the palace. In fact, he loved to show it off. But in any case, Sebastian is right about one thing. Morven *was* protective of the palace he'd built. Some say he sacrificed his life for it."

Alana's eyes grew wide. "What do you mean, Duchess Dagmer?" she asked.

The duchess took a sip from her silver goblet before continuing. "One day Morven heard that a terrible storm was coming, with deadly whirlpools and water temperatures considered cold even by Arctic standards. They say the wind above the surface was so strong that it blew giant icebergs around like cockleshells in a current.

"Most people decided they'd be better off

waiting out the storm in calmer waters. Luckily there was some advance warning. Many people left the area entirely. The rest of the kingdom hid out in the ice caverns beneath the city, where they were certain they'd be fairly safe."

"What about Morven?" Adella asked. "Which did he do?"

"Neither," replied the duchess. "Morven couldn't stand the thought that something might happen to his precious palace during the storm. He decided to stay right here through the whole thing."

"But that was stupid," Arista exclaimed. "What did he think he'd be able to do to save it if something *did* happen? You can't fight a storm."

The King, who had been listening to the duchess's story as he ate, chuckled wryly. "If only poor Morven had been as logical as you are, my dear, we wouldn't be having this conversation," he said.

"Your father's right," the duchess said. "Nobody really knows exactly why Morven decided to stay, or what happened next. But apparently the palace was struck by a small iceberg during the storm."

"Oh no!" Ariel gasped.

"The palace was strong enough to withstand it and wasn't badly damaged," the duchess said. "However, the collision was strong enough to shake things up inside quite a bit."

"What happened to Morven?" Andrina asked.

The duchess took the last bite of her salad and gestured for a waiter to take away her plate. She dabbed at her face with a white napkin. The princesses held their breath as they waited for her to continue the story.

"Well," the duchess said at last, "Morven was in his private sitting room when the iceberg hit. That was his favorite of the private rooms in the palace, probably because it was the very first room he'd hollowed out himself. There was a big, heavy bookcase in there, and it toppled over from the force of the collision, right on top of him. They're pretty sure he was killed instantly."

"How horrible!" Alana exclaimed.

"Yes, it is rather a terrible story," the duchess agreed. "After his death his wife closed off that sitting room and his other private rooms and wouldn't let anyone near

them. Many years later, after she herself died, their children decided to open up all the rooms again. They turned Morven's sitting room into a bedroom, and one of the daughters' maids moved in."

"And then she moved right back out again, if I recall correctly from the stories you used to tell me as a child," Triton said to Duchess Dagmer with a smile.

"That's right," the duchess replied. "She spent half a night there but swam out screaming at around midnight, claiming that Morven's ghost had appeared to her and chased her out of the room."

"She left, just like that?" Andrina commented scornfully. "Just because he told her to go away or something? What a guppy!"

The duchess raised her eyebrows. "He did more than tell her," she said. "As a matter of fact, this girl was rather brave. She stayed for quite a while after the ghost appeared, thinking that if she ignored him he'd go away." She laughed. "People back then weren't as easily frightened by the supernatural as we are nowadays."

"What finally made her leave, Duchess?" Adella asked impatiently.

"I suppose that after a while Morven decided he'd given her enough warning," the duchess said. "He swam to the bookcase—the same one that killed him—and started to push it over. If that maid had been a little slower on her fins, she'd have been crushed to death."

"You mean the ghost—or whatever—actually pushed over the bookcase?" Attina asked skeptically. She frowned and crossed her arms. "I'm sorry, but that just seems impossible. Ghosts don't do that kind of thing, even in stories."

"She's right," Alana piped in. "I thought they couldn't move real objects. After all, they even pass right through walls. It's one of the rules."

The duchess threw back her head and laughed. "I guess nobody ever bothered to tell Morven the rules for being a ghost," she said, "because when others from the palace went into the room, they found the bookcase toppled over, just as the maid had claimed. After that, nobody ever tried to stay in that room again."

Attina was shaking her head. "It all still seems pretty farfetched to me," she said. "I

mean, why didn't they just take the bookcase out of the room?"

"They couldn't," the duchess said. "It had been built inside the room and wouldn't fit through the door. Besides, Morven's children didn't want to make him angry. They decided it was easier just to leave that room alone."

"Did Morven haunt any of the other rooms?" asked Alana worriedly.

"Oh, he's appeared elsewhere in the palace from time to time," said the duchess. "I myself first saw him in the hallway. But as far as I know, he's never tried to chase anybody away from any of the other rooms, not even the ones he kept people out of when he was alive. It's just that one room, so throughout the generations our family has always been content to let him have it. It's really a gloomy little room anyway, and much smaller than the other rooms in the palace."

"But Ariel—," Andrina began.

Ariel shot her a warning look. There was no point in making the duchess feel bad by telling her that Ariel was staying in that very room. Still, after hearing the story, Ariel had a hard time finishing her dinner.

Fortunately Adella volunteered to finish Ariel's food for her.

After dinner all of the duchess's guests assembled in the ballroom to enjoy a performance by the Arctic Gillharmonic Orchestra. But before long the princesses were yawning. They'd traveled all day, and it was very late.

At intermission they said good night to the duchess, the King, and the others. "Sleep well," Starwin called after them as the mermaids swam out of the ballroom and headed up to the second floor.

The princesses stayed close together as they headed down the long, dark hall to their bedchambers. Ariel's room came first. "Want us to go in with you and check for signs of Morven?" Andrina teased.

"Very funny, Andrina," said Ariel. "It's not too late for us to switch rooms, if you're interested."

"Look, those ghost stories are just that—stories," Arista assured her. "There's nothing to worry about."

"Easy for you to say," Alana said with a shudder. "But poor Ariel's the one who has to try to *sleep* in this horrible room."

"There's nothing wrong with the room," Ariel said, trying to sound convincing. "It just could use a little redecorating." She opened the door and led her sisters inside. "See?"

"Ariel's right," said Attina, gazing around her. "A few paintings on the walls, some books in the bookcase, and this room would be fine."

"I guess Morven just didn't have very good taste," Adella joked.

"Told you," said Ariel. She yawned and settled back onto her bed. "I'll be fine, Morven or no Mor—"

Suddenly she was interrupted by a low, terrible howl.

The mermaids stared at each other, eyes wide with fear. "Wh-what was th-that?" Alana whispered.

"The currents?" Andrina suggested hopefully.

From somewhere in the room, chains rattled. A slow pounding began. The chilling howl grew louder.

Ariel felt a shiver travel down her spine. If that was a current, it was like no current she'd ever heard before.

The howl seemed to come closer. Now it sounded like a voice—an angry merman's voice.

"GET OUT!" it cried.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm not going to stay around and argue!" Alana cried, swimming out the door as fast as she could. The rest of the mermaids weren't far behind.

"What in the sea was that?" Ariel exclaimed as she slammed the door behind them.

"That howling!" Aquata cried. "It was awful!"

"And what was that pounding?" Adella demanded.

Alana shook her head. "I think that was my heart!"

Ariel spun around and eased open the door.

"Ariel! Are you crazy?" Alana gasped. "Don't go back in there!"

"The sounds have stopped," Ariel said, peering into the room. It was empty.

"Can we talk about this in someone else's bedroom?" Alana begged. "Even this dark hallway gives me the creeps."

"Relax, Alana," Andrina said. "There's got to be a logical explanation for this."

"And I know just what it is," Alana said firmly as the sisters headed into Andrina's room next door. "Morven still doesn't feel like sharing his favorite room."

Ariel sank into a chair and sighed. She had to admit that Andrina's room was much cozier than her own.

"Maybe all we were hearing was the current outside," Andrina suggested.

Adella examined her reflection in one of the polished ice walls. "Or maybe it was a shifting iceberg," she suggested. "Sebastian said they sometimes move."

"How about a walrus?" Attina said. "There

are lots of them in this part of the ocean."

"Is that how a walrus sounds?" asked Ariel.

"How should I know?" Attina said. "I've never even seen a walrus."

Alana wrung her hands. "It was Morven," she said, a quaver in her voice. "I know it was."

"Maybe one of Duchess Dagmer's other guests has a baby who's teething or something," Ariel suggested. "Maybe the baby's room is right below mine."

"Babies can't talk," Adella argued as she tried on one of Andrina's periwinkle hair combs. "And the voice we heard definitely said 'Get out.' "

"You can stay in my room tonight, Ariel," Alana volunteered.

"Thanks, Alana," Ariel said, "but I'll be fine." When she was doing daring things like exploring old shipwrecks, nothing scared her. She couldn't let a little howling bother her—could she?

Adella yawned. "Well, I hope you're right. In any case, I've had enough excitement for one night," she said. "Sweet dreams, Ariel. Or should I say 'good luck'?"

Aquata gave Ariel a comforting pat on the back as she swam out of the room. "If you see or hear anything strange, just call us," she said. "We'll be right down the hall."

"Thanks," Ariel said. She hoped she wouldn't have to take Aquata up on that offer.

In the hallway Alana clutched Ariel's arm. "Ariel," she whispered after the others had disappeared into their rooms, "please don't leave me. Not yet."

"What's wrong, Alana?"

Alana bit her lip. "I know this is crazy, and you're the one who should really be scared, but would you go with me to my room?"

Ariel grinned. "Just in case it's haunted, too?"

"You never know," said Alana.

Alana opened her door very carefully. Ariel peeked inside. "No Morven," she reported.

"Would you come in with me?" Alana begged. "I just want to check the closet."

"How about under the bed?" Ariel teased.

"Good idea!" Alana exclaimed.

While Alana checked under the bed, Ariel

went over to the window. "You've got a nice view," she said. "My room doesn't even have a window." She peered out into the icy black sea. Across the castle grounds, the giant iceberg they had passed on the way in knifed toward the surface. "You can see the castle reflected in that iceberg," Ariel said.

Alana was swimming toward the closet. "What?" she asked.

"I said—" Suddenly Ariel's voice caught in her throat. Near a large shimmering icicle just outside the window, she saw a hideous pale blue creature wearing a long black cape. Suddenly it darted forward, its face partially hidden behind its wildly swirling black hair.

"Ariel?" Alana said. "Is something wrong?"

At last Ariel found her voice. "Alana, it's Morven!" she screamed.

"I saw him!" Ariel cried. "He was pale blue, just like the duchess said, and he had long black hair and a flowing cape—"

"Hide!" Alana screeched, diving under the covers of her bed. "Hide, Ariel, before it's too late!"

But Ariel wasn't ready to hide—not yet. She took a deep breath and looked out the window again.

The iceberg shimmered in the distance. A solitary seal glided by. But Morven was nowhere to be seen.

"He's gone," Ariel exclaimed.

Alana peeked out from under her blanket. "Gone?" she whispered.

"I'm *sure* I saw him, though," Ariel insisted.

"If you need me, I'll be hiding under here," Alana said. "For the rest of my life."

Adella burst in through the doorway, followed by the others. "What happened?" she demanded. "I was just getting into bed when I heard a scream."

"Ariel," said Arista, "are you all right? You look like you just saw a—"

"I did," Ariel said. "Right outside the window."

Andrina swam over to the window. "I don't see anything. Just a whole lot of ice."

"He was behind that big icicle," Ariel said, pointing.

"Maybe it was just your imagination playing tricks on you," Attina suggested. "I'm sure there's an explanation."

"Like there was an explanation for that awful howling in her room?" Adella said doubtfully.

"We all know what the explanation is," Alana said in a muffled voice. "Morven."

"Alana?" Adella said. "Where are you?"

"She's hiding under the blanket," Ariel explained.

"Forever," Alana added.

"Calm down, Alana," Attina said. "You're overreacting, as usual."

"Calm down? Calm down?" Alana poked her head out. "How do you expect me to sleep, knowing there's a ghost prowling around out there?"

"Alana, if you're really scared, you can sleep in my room tonight," Andrina said.

For the first time Alana smiled. "Thanks," she said gratefully. "But what about Ariel?"

"She can sleep in my room," Aquata volunteered.

Ariel hesitated. She didn't like thinking she was being chased out of her room by a ghost. Still, she knew that if she tried to stay in her own room she wouldn't be likely to get much sleep. "All right," she said finally. "Thanks, Aquata. I'm still not sure I believe in Morven, but I'd really rather not take a chance of having that big old bookcase pushed over on top of me while I'm sleeping tonight."

"There *is* no Morven," Attina said firmly.

"Attina's right," Andrina agreed.

Adella frowned. "I wish I were as sure as you two."

"I'll tell you how sure I am," said Attina. "If it turns out this place is actually haunted, I'll . . . I'll kiss both the dukes!"

Ariel laughed. The more she thought about it, the more sure she was that Attina and Andrina were right. Ghosts didn't exist. Whatever she'd seen outside that window, it couldn't have been Morven.

Still, she was glad she was staying in Aquata's room.

* * *

"Sleep well?" Winterford asked Ariel when she ran into him the next morning in the upstairs hallway.

"Fine," Ariel said quickly. "Great. Like a baby."

"That's good," Winterford said. "See you all at breakfast." He disappeared down the hall.

"Did you really sleep OK?" asked Alana as she and the others joined Ariel.

"Sure," Ariel said with a grin, "except for Aquata's snoring."

"I do *not* snore," Aquata protested. "I breathe deeply."

"You breathe deeply and sound like a snorting sea horse," Ariel corrected.

"Well, listening to Aquata snore can't be as bad as listening to Morven howl all night," Adella commented.

"True," said Ariel as the sisters approached the dining hall. "Speaking of Morven, I went to my room this morning and locked the door." She held up her coral key. "I don't know if you can lock out a ghost. I don't even know if what I saw really *was* a ghost. But if anything gets through my locked door, then we'll know for sure."

In the main hall servants swam about busily, making last-minute preparations for the birthday party. Two hammerfish were hanging a large banner that read Happy One Hundredth!

"There they are," exclaimed the duchess as the sisters entered the dining hall. The long table was filled with chattering guests. Starwin and Winterford were already seated at the table next to their great-grandmother. Their breakfasts were half-eaten.

"Happy birthday, Duchess," Aquata exclaimed. Her sisters added their congratulations as well.

"Thank you, my dears," said the duchess.

"How did you two get here so quickly?" Ariel asked the dukes as she sat down in the chair Winterford held out for her.

Winterford shrugged. "I guess we boys are just naturally faster than you girls."

"Oh really?" Andrina asked. "As far as I'm concerned, the only things boys can do better is *brag*. Unless, of course, you count burping."

The duchess cleared her throat. "Now, Winterford," she said. "Tell the princesses the truth. You've been using the secret passageways again, haven't you?"

Winterford nodded. "Yes, Great-grandmother."

"Secret passageways?" Ariel asked with interest, thinking of her own secret grotto back home. She loved to collect treasures from the shipwrecks she explored. She kept them in a hidden grotto she'd discovered near the palace.

"This whole castle is connected by a series of secret passageways," the duchess explained. She looked over at King Triton. "Why, I can remember your father sneaking through them when he was a youngster!"

Sebastian came scuttling into the room. "Aren't you young ladies finished with breakfast yet?" he demanded.

"They just sat down, Sebastian," said the duchess. "Won't you join us?"

Sebastian rubbed his forehead with his claws. "Perhaps later, Duchess," he said with a little bow. "But the princesses have some important work—some very important work—to do."

"Work?" the duchess cried. "This is supposed to be a *fun* occasion, Sebastian. After all, it's my one-hundredth birthday. And as the official birthday girl, I think you should give the princesses some time off."

"That's all right, Duchess," Ariel said. She knew Sebastian was anxious to have them practice the special song he'd composed for the party. "We don't mind."

"Yes, we do," Adella complained. "I've barely started my breakfast."

"Your breakfast can wait, Adella," said Aquata in her oldest-sister voice. She turned to the duchess. "We're sorry to have to run off and rehearse on your birthday, but the big Oceanvironmental Week concert is coming up soon after we get back home. If we don't

keep practicing, we'll never be ready on time." It was true that the sisters were going to be performing for Oceanvironmental Week, but they all knew that that wasn't why Sebastian wanted them to practice. He wanted them to have one last rehearsal of Duchess Dagmer's birthday song before the festivities that evening.

"Well, don't work too hard, girls," the duchess said as they left the room.

* * *

"I've found the perfect place to practice," said Sebastian as the princesses followed him down the hallway. "It's far away from the other wings, so there's little chance the duchess will hear us. We do want to keep this a surprise."

He led them to a large music room. In the center was a small raised stage where music stands had been set up for the princesses. Near the back of the room was a balcony hidden in shadow.

"Your music's all ready," Sebastian said as the sisters took their places. He picked up his baton and tapped it on his music stand.

"What's up there?" Ariel asked.

Sebastian turned around and glanced up

at the balcony. "More seats for an audience. This used to be a performance room, they tell me. All I can say is that it's a good thing you girls don't have to perform right now. Need I remind you that the last time we practiced this, you sounded like a bunch of hungry seals? Now, can I hope that you've at least memorized the words?"

Adella cleared her throat. "I'm so hungry I could faint," she sang in her sweet, pure voice.

"Do I seem amused?" Sebastian asked sternly as the other mermaids laughed. "Have you forgotten that the birthday banquet is tonight? Now, let us begin." He tapped his baton again, and the mermaids grew serious.

"Happy Birthday, Duchess Dagmer, ruler of the Arctic Sea," they sang. "We've all come here to honor you on your first century. . . ."

Suddenly, in the dark balcony, a light went on. As the princesses watched in horror, a terrifying image appeared. There, bathed in the bright light, swam a black-haired merman with pale blue skin and eyes that glowered menacingly.

Morven was back.

"Why aren't you girls singing?" Sebastian demanded, throwing up his arms. "Your mouths are hanging open, but there's no sound coming out."

All the princesses stared at each other, shocked into speechlessness. Then they looked back up at the balcony, where the hideous ghost still hovered. Finally, Adella managed to speak. "Morven," she said in a hoarse whisper.

"Morven?" Sebastian repeated quickly. "The *ghost* Morven? What are you talking about?"

"Up there." Adella pointed with a trembling finger to the balcony.

Sebastian gulped and put down his baton. "If this is another one of your pranks, Your Highnesses . . ." Slowly he turned around. But the instant he did, the light went out, and the ghost seemed to vanish.

"That does it!" Sebastian cried. "You may think this is funny, but I—"

"But it was him!" Adella cried. She turned to her sisters. "You saw him, too, didn't you?"

Ariel nodded. "I don't know what it was, but it was the same thing—or creature—that I saw outside of Alana's window last night."

"I saw him," Alana said, her voice quaking. "And I know exactly what he was. The ghost of Morven, that's what."

"I saw him, too," said Arista.

"So did I," Aquata agreed.

"I saw *something*," Andrina admitted. "I'm not sure what, but it was definitely ugly."

"I saw something, too," Attina said. "But that doesn't necessarily mean it was a ghost."

"If you think this is going to get you out

of practicing, you're wrong," Sebastian said. He straightened his music and, with one last glance back at the balcony, signaled for them to begin singing again.

"Happy Birthday, Duchess Dagmer," they began, but no one was concentrating on the song. Even Sebastian seemed distracted. Every few seconds he glanced over his shoulder nervously.

Halfway through the second verse, he gave up. "Enough," he cried. "You girls aren't concentrating! Let's practice again later." He folded up his music and gave a nervous laugh. "In a different room."

"One that's not haunted," Adella added.

Sebastian shook his head. "You girls are such pranksters," he muttered, but Adella noticed that he was the first one out the door.

* * *

"Do you think we should tell someone about Morven?" Alana asked as the sisters headed to their rooms that afternoon.

"Someone?" Andrina echoed. "Like who? Sebastian didn't believe us. At least he *said* he didn't. Father's been so busy all day, we've hardly seen him. And if we told the

duchess, she'd probably just laugh and tell us to give Morven her regards."

"Maybe we should all sleep in one room tonight," Adella said nervously.

"Don't you think that would get a little crowded?" asked Arista.

Attina crossed her arms over her chest and sighed. "I still say you're all overreacting," she said.

They turned down the hall past the huge, gleaming kitchen. Two mermaids were putting the finishing touches on the duchess's enormous birthday cake. Their faces were splotched with white sea-oat flour.

Attina grinned. "Did you see that, Alana? Two more ghosts!"

"Very funny, Attina," Alana said crossly.

"Maybe we should try to make friends with Morven," Ariel suggested as they started up to the second floor. "It could be that he's just lonely."

Adella shuddered. "He doesn't exactly seem like a friendly guy, Ariel."

"You know, it's getting so I hate going down this creepy old hallway," Aquata said as they approached the wing where they were staying.

"It's not the hallway we have to worry about," said Ariel. "It's our bedrooms." She turned down the hall and let out a gasp.

"What's wrong?" asked Alana.

"You know what I just said about the hallway?" Ariel said grimly. "I changed my mind."

There, in the middle of the hall, sat her belongings, neatly stacked on the floor.

"Who did this?" Andrina demanded.

Ariel shook her head in disbelief. "I've got a better question," she said. She held up the key to her room. "*How* was it done?"

Andrina reached for the doorknob. "It's still locked," she reported.

"Are you sure we should go in?" Alana whispered as Ariel began to unlock the door. "Maybe we should call one of the guards to check first."

"I'm sure there's nothing to worry about, Alana," Ariel said, but as she swung open the door, she realized how wrong she was.

Morven hovered in the dark corner, barely visible. His eyes seemed to glow like black ice. Slowly he raised his arm, pointing at the mermaids with a pale blue finger.

"It's him!" Ariel hissed.

Morven's dark hair partially obscured his face, but the princesses could see that he looked angry. "Be gone from this place!" he bellowed. Chains rattled. The walls rumbled. The room itself seemed to moan with horror.

The princesses didn't wait to hear any more. They swam down the hall in a flurry of bubbles. "Help!" Alana cried. "He's after us!"

At the end of the hall they paused, panting. "Let's tell the duchess," Aquata suggested.

"Let's tell Father," said Arista.

"Let's call the guards," Andrina said.

"Let's go home," Alana whined.

Ariel took a deep breath. "Let's go back," she said.

"Don't, Ariel," Attina cried. "Even *I* believe in Morven now!"

Andrina managed a smile. "Wait a minute. Doesn't that mean you have to kiss the dukes?"

"Quiet, Andrina," Attina said. "This is serious. I think Ariel would be crazy to go back there. Morven obviously doesn't want us in his room."

"Maybe I am crazy," Ariel replied. "But I'm tired of being hounded by this ghost—

if that's what it is. Maybe if I explained that we're only borrowing his room for a little while—"

"You can't reason with a ghost, Ariel," Aquata argued.

But it was too late. Ariel was already swimming back to her room.

"We can't let her go by herself," Andrina said, following behind.

"Sometimes I wish you two weren't so brave," Alana muttered as she swam after them with the others.

Swallowing hard, Ariel peeked into her bedroom. Morven had vanished.

"No sign of him," she reported to her sisters as she swam around the room. She leaned against the bookcase and sighed. "I guess I should start moving my belongings back in."

"And have him do the same thing all over again?" Aquata demanded.

Ariel didn't answer. Something caught on a nail in the bookcase had caught her attention—a few strands of something long and silky and black.

She untangled it and held it up for her sisters to see.

"It's a piece of Morven's hair!" cried Alana. "Throw it away, Ariel! Something horrible might happen! Your fingers will fall off! Your eyes will turn to sporn ice!"

But Ariel wasn't listening. She was examining the bookcase carefully from top to bottom. "There's something very strange going on here," she muttered.

A small knob under one of the shelves caught her eye. She turned it and took a step back. Slowly, while the mermaids watched in amazement, the bookcase swung open into the room. Behind it was a long, dark passageway.

"It's one of the secret passageways that Duchess Dagmer told us about," Aquata exclaimed.

"Exactly," said Ariel. "And ghosts don't need to use passageways. I think we're about to discover that whoever has been haunting us isn't really a ghost at all." She pointed to a smudge of pale blue paint on the wall near the entrance to the passageway. "Come on," she said, swimming into the icy black tunnel. "Let's pay a little visit to Morven."

The tunnel was as dark as a shark's eye. The mermaids swam in silence for a while, with Ariel and Andrina in the lead. They had to move slowly and feel their way along the slippery walls of ice. Alana grabbed Ariel's tail and held on tight.

"It's kind of hard to swim that way," Ariel said gently.

"Sorry," Alana said, "but I can't see a thing. I promise to let go when I see where we end up."

"I wish I knew where that was going to

be," Arista said nervously, running her fingers along the slick wall.

"The duchess said there are tunnels all over the whole house," Ariel said.

"But what makes you think Morven—or whoever is pretending to be Morven—went this way?" Attina asked.

"Just a hunch," Ariel replied.

"He could be around any bend, just waiting to get us," Alana whispered. "Even if he's not a real ghost, we wouldn't have a chance in this tunnel. We'd be trapped!"

"Calm down, Alana," Andrina urged. "You're going to scare everyone."

"Too late for that," said Aquata. "We're already scared."

Ariel stopped when she noticed a long vertical crack in the wall of the passageway. Alana crashed into her. "Sorry," she said. "I can't see past the end of my nose."

"I think I've found something," Ariel whispered. "It's a door of some kind."

"That's nice. A door. Now can we go back?" Alana asked, shivering.

Ariel pushed on the ice door. It didn't move. Andrina came over and helped her, but it still wouldn't budge.

"Come on," Ariel said. "Everybody help push."

All seven mermaids leaned against the door and pushed as hard as they could. Suddenly it gave way, and they tumbled through the doorway into a bedroom. And there, tumbling on the floor with them, were Starwin and Winterford!

Starwin's arms and chest were covered with pale blue paint. He was holding a frightening mask and a wig made of long strands of black seaweed. "How dare you come bursting into our room this way!" he shouted as he grabbed a cloth and tried to rub some of the paint off his arms.

"How dare you try to scare us," Ariel shot back.

"It was you, Starwin?" Alana cried. "I couldn't sleep at all last night because I was so afraid of Morven. And he's *you*?"

Winterford and Starwin looked at each other sheepishly. "It was just a little practical joke," Starwin admitted.

"Little?" Adella cried. "We were really convinced you were Morven!"

"Not bad, huh?" Winterford asked with a mischievous grin.

Attina frowned. "But how did you make all those noises?" she asked doubtfully.

"Easy—from the secret passageway," Starwin replied. "It's right behind the bedchamber walls. As for floating past your window, that was simple. And in the music room balcony, all we had to do was use a lanternfish as a spotlight."

"But what about putting Ariel's things out in the hall when her door was still locked? How did you manage that?" Aquata asked.

Ariel knew the answer. "The secret passageway again," she said.

"That was Winterford's idea," Starwin said. "I told him it would be a lot of work, but he thought it was a nice touch."

"Nice touch?" Alana exploded. "Nice touch? Do you realize how scared we've been?"

"*Some* of us have been," Andrina corrected her.

"Probably as scared as *we* were when you threatened us with that octopus," Winterford retorted.

"Is that what this is all about?" asked Aquata. "You've just been trying to get even with us for a silly trick we played on you years ago?"

"That, and the fact that we love a good practical joke," Starwin answered. He grinned. "And it *was* a good joke, you have to admit."

Winterford looked worried. "You aren't going to tell on us, are you?" he asked. "We really didn't mean to make you mad. We thought you liked jokes."

Ariel was beginning to get an idea. "Oh, we do like jokes," she said with a smile. "Don't worry, we won't tell."

"Who says we won't?" Arista cried. "I think the duchess should know about this." She turned to glare at the dukes. "I can't believe you two could be so obnoxious!"

"And cruel," Alana added. "And thoughtless!"

"We're sorry, Princesses, really we are," Starwin said seriously. "We were just trying to have a little fun." He looked at his brother. "And we sure did!" he added, breaking into gales of laughter.

"How can you laugh about this?" Aquata demanded, but Ariel took her arm.

"It's OK, Aquata," she said. "It's OK."

Andrina seemed to be getting the same idea Ariel had. She reached for Starwin's wig and tried it on. "Ariel's right," she said,

winking at her youngest sister. "It was all in good fun." She gazed into a mirror. "What do you think? I've always wondered what I'd look like as a brunette." She tossed the wig aside. "I have to give you credit, boys. This was impressive."

"No hard feelings?" Starwin asked.

"No hard feelings. We aren't mad," Ariel assured him.

"Well then, I guess we'll see you tonight at the birthday banquet," Starwin said with a relieved smile.

"We're looking forward to it," Andrina said politely.

"You're being awfully forgiving," Alana chided Ariel and Andrina as they swam away from the dukes.

"Oh, no, we're not," Ariel said. She looked over at Andrina and grinned. "You know the old saying. Don't get mad—get even!"

"Duchess," Andrina said that evening during the birthday banquet, "I'm not feeling well. I think I'll go up to my room."

"That's all right, dear," the duchess said with a wink. "I understand. We'll save you a piece of my birthday cake."

Ariel hid a smile behind her hand. Of course, the duchess really *did* understand. In fact, every one of the hundreds of people in the grand ballroom understood, except for two: Starwin and Winterford.

That afternoon, when the princesses had

told the duchess their idea for revenge, she had instantly agreed to go along with their scheme. After all, she'd said, it would serve the dukes right. Besides, she thought it would be great fun to play a practical joke on her birthday.

Ariel watched as Andrina swam away from the long table, holding her stomach and pretending to feel sick.

The duchess leaned over to Ariel. "If your little joke goes as well as the birthday song you girls performed for me, this is going to be the best birthday I've ever had!" she told her gleefully.

Ariel was so excited she could hardly finish her dinner. She was relieved when the dishes were finally cleared away by the waiters. That meant it was time for her sister to make her dramatic appearance.

"I wonder what's keeping Andrina?" Alana said to Ariel.

"She'd better hurry," Ariel whispered back. "They're already bringing out the birthday cake."

"Maybe she had trouble putting on the blue makeup," Aquata suggested.

Winterford waved to them from farther

down the table, and the mermaids waved back sweetly.

Ariel watched as three of the waiters brought in a huge white birthday cake. "The whole joke will be ruined if she doesn't show up soon," she said.

Attina looked over at Starwin and Winterford. "I'm worried the dukes won't believe that Andrina is Morven."

"Me, too." Ariel frowned. "Andrina's not exactly the most convincing ghost in the world. Every time she practiced her howl, she made me laugh."

"Me, too," Arista admitted. "But she was better than the rest of us."

"That's true," said Adella. "And at least she's loud."

The waiters placed the cake in front of Duchess Dagmer. The duchess opened her mouth to speak, but just then an earsplitting howl filled the room.

"Here she comes," Ariel whispered excitedly.

"Excellent howl!" Alana said.

Into the room swooped the ghost, just as the mermaids had expected. It swam straight over to Starwin and Winterford and hovered

above them. "It's . . . it's him!" Starwin cried, bolting from his seat.

But none of the other guests reacted at all. They kept talking as if the ghost weren't even there, just as the duchess had told them to do.

"Help!" Winterford screamed. He dashed toward the duchess and grabbed her arm. "Hurry, Great-grandmother! Swim for your life! It's Morven! This time it's *really* Morven!"

"Be gone!" the ghost bellowed in a voice so low it seemed to send shock waves through the water.

"Not bad," Arista said to her sisters. "How did she do that?"

Winterford shook the duchess by the shoulders. "Hurry!" he cried again, his voice trembling.

The duchess pinched a piece of icing off her cake and tasted it. "What in all the sea is the matter with you, dear boy?" she asked mildly.

"Be gone, Dukes!" the ghost shouted again, waving its arms. It swirled around the heads of the boys while they cowered in fear.

"Don't you see him?" Winterford de-

manded. He turned toward the King. "It's Morven! The ghost! The *real* ghost!"

King Triton smiled politely. "Perhaps you ate too much seaweed stew, Winterford."

Winterford looked at his brother in terror. His face was as white as the frosting on the cake. "What do we do?" he cried. "We're the only ones who can see him!"

"Out! OUT!" the ghost wailed, pointing to the door.

"I don't know about you, but I'm skipping dessert," Starwin said. "Let's go!"

The two boys swam away at high speed, their tail fins swishing madly. The ghost swam off behind them but paused for a moment and looked back over its shoulder. "Happy birthday, Duchess," it said in its deep, booming voice.

As soon as the dukes were out of the room, everyone broke into wild laughter. It was hard to tell who laughed the hardest—the duchess, the King, or the princesses. "That was incredible," Adella exclaimed, wiping tears from her eyes.

The sisters and the King gathered around the duchess. "Thanks for helping us with the joke, Duchess," Arista said.

"Oh, you don't have to thank me, girls," the duchess said with a laugh. "Your sister did all the work."

"Andrina was amazing," Ariel agreed. "She even had *me* scared!"

"Where is she, anyway?" Aquata asked. "She should come back in here and take a bow."

"She's probably cleaning off all that blue makeup," Arista said.

The duchess was still chuckling. "Those boys really needed to be taught a lesson, and your sister did a marvelous job."

Just then Andrina came rushing into the room. "I'm sorry, really I am," she said breathlessly.

"Sorry?" Ariel exclaimed. "What are you talking about?"

Andrina sank into a chair with a sigh. "It's the strangest thing. I went up to my room, but the wig and mask and makeup were missing. Then, when I tried to leave, the door was jammed! I couldn't get it open until just a minute ago—" She glanced down the table and frowned. "Hey, where are the dukes, anyway?"

"Wait a minute," Ariel said. She glanced

at her other sisters. "You mean you've been upstairs the whole time?"

"Of course," Andrina said.

"But—" Ariel looked puzzled. "But if you were trapped in your room upstairs, then who was that blue man with the long black hair?"

"What are you talking about?" Andrina asked.

The sisters all exchanged confused glances.

Suddenly the duchess laughed. "Well, well, I guess we've all been fooled, haven't we?" she said. "That sly old trickster."

"What do you mean?" Ariel asked.

"Don't you see?" the duchess said. "Everyone in the palace was here in the room with us. So if that wasn't Andrina pretending to be Morven, well, then there's only one other solution. That was the *real* Morven."

The others all stared at each other in confusion and disbelief as the duchess threw back her head and laughed again. "I haven't had this much fun in seventy years. I think Morven just gave me the best birthday present I could have hoped for!"

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The little mermaid princess, Ariel, and her six older sisters–Aquata, Alana, Andrina, Attina, Adella, and Arista–live in a glorious castle deep below the ocean. But growing up in a palace isn't easy...especially with seven teenage mermaids and a strict father all living under one roof!

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ISBN 1-56282-503-8

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